
The Primitive Family as an Educational Agency by Arthur James Todd

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NOTES AND REVIEWS

The Primitive Family as an Educational Agency. By ARTHUR JAMES TODD, Ph.D. Pp. viii, 251. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1913.

This is a study that should prove both interesting and profitable to anthropologists, sociologists and educators. The author was prompted to make it because of his interest in the changing status of the family. Being firmly convinced of the inevitable character of evolutionary change, and confronted with the cries of alarm at the apparent decadence of family life, he was led to inquire whether the family can change its form and function without injuring society as a whole; and whether, assuming the family to have been the basic educational agency and to be now losing this function, a more adequate and efficient educational system based on other social institutions can be devised (p. vi). In the answer to these questions he has given both a sketch of early family life and a survey of primitive educational methods. This he has done in a very clear and systematic form with an abundance, if not a superfluity, of concrete material much of it so interesting that the reader must beware that he does not forget the theme because of his entrancement in the sidelights of savage custom.

The author's main problem was therefore to inquire into the truthfulness of the doctrine that "the family is the first, most natural, most indispensable agency in education." His method is to array the evidence as revealed by a study of "Primitive Marital Relations," including (1) "Promiscuity and Group Marriage" (ch. ii), and (2) "Trial Marriage, Divorce, Polygamy" (ch. iii), "Primitive Notions of Kinship and Relationship" (ch. iv), "Primitive Parental and Filial Relations" (ch. v).

Positing a "narrow range of primitive life interests," and the excessive conservatism, childlikeness, dullness of sensibilities, weak memory and hazy notion of self of the primitive mind he finds first that "the family is a strictly pragmatic institution" "rooted in physiology, economics and the mores" (p. 11). It is "a social not a natural institution" (p. 19), and its form was determined by the necessary conditions of self-perpetuation and preservation;

it preceded marriage (p. 21); it merged from unstable forms of cohabitation to more stable ones. Until a sedentary life was approximated, each sex being largely self-subsistent, the marriage relation was one of "intermittent promiscuity" (p. 35). Frequent group marriage, trial marriage, easy divorce and periods of sexual indulgence make it clear that the original sex relation was "promiscuity mixed with apathetic monogamous pairing" (p. 44).

Some of these conclusions will meet with disapproval by partisans of opposing views; but the author has usually presented some evidence pro and con principal propositions and striven to maintain a judicial attitude. Nevertheless he has not always succeeded in avoiding the appearance of dogmatism, as when he says (p. 46), "Premarital chastity is practically unknown, nor even conceived, among lower peoples."

The general result of this historical inquiry is the conclusion that the primitive family must have left the child without education, "or what is worse, with an education in rebellion, looseness, and egoism."

This conclusion is strengthened by data (ch. iv) on sex taboos, procreation myths, couvade, ideas of paternity, showing the feebleness of family bonds and their subordination to group ties; and by evidence on the quality of parental affection, on ignorance of child hygiene, on infant mortality, infanticide, the selling and the eating of children, and the lack of filial regard. Not only therefore was the family unstable, and the relation of parents to children lacking in certainty and stability but parents themselves were ignorant, insensible and temperamental so that the conditions of order and consistency of relations essential to education were wanting. The primitive family was therefore "rather biologic and economic than educational in its function" (p. 140).

The second part of the author's problem is to show that the group rather than the family was the principal agent in education. This is done by a study of the aims and content (ch. vi), methods and organization (ch. vii), of primitive education. It is found that in the lowest culture stages the child educates himself by a process of instinctive imitation. The controlled imitation, drill and superstition of a more advanced stage are regulated partly by domestic and partly by communal agencies; but exhortation is mainly public, whereas "the most important methods of all, ceremonies of initiation and tribal festivals, are distinctively public" (p. 216). Play at all stages of culture is a process of self-education.

It thus appears that the family has always been an educational agency subordinate in importance to and dominated in its character and functioning by the social group of which it has been a part: that it has changed with social evolution and under the patriarchal form attained greater significance as an educational factor than previously; that changes in its status now under way may, or indeed may not, give it "a more transcendent and valuable rôle than it has heretofore played" (p. 230); but that historical study shows the possibility of invoking many social institutions in the process of educating youth.

There is an excellent "Selected Bibliography" (pp. 231-241) and a "Subject Index." Whether one can accept the fundamental evolutionary and naturalistic position of the author or his particular conclusions the book cannot be overlooked by any one interested in its field.

F. H. HANKINS.